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ABSTRACT

Noting that details of everyday life contribute to parental equality or inequality, this qualitative study focused on how couples transformed parental roles to create truly equal families. Participating in the study were 88 couples in 4 categories, based on division of parental responsibilities: equal sharers, 60-40 couples, 75-25 couples, and alternating-shift couples. Equality was defined as a 50-50 split in child care over a typical week. Data were collected through telephone interviews and follow-up face-to-face interviews. The study found that couples' employment decisions set them on trajectories toward or away from equality, with unequal parenting often developing over time through numerous husband-wife interactions. Parents' emotional responses, role identities, distrust of daycare, and cultural ideals jeopardized translating egalitarian ideologies into equal parenting. Equal couples varied in how they defined and divided family work, how they explained it, and how they negotiated equality. They found ways of resisting and transforming dominant social messages reinforcing unequal parenting. Typical unequal couples were comprised of mothers who exhibited no-win work patterns contributing to inequality and fathers who were helpers, sharers, or slackers. Equal parents argued over principles involved in domestic labor, whereas unequal parents argued over parenting practice. Men used a variety of strategies to resist domestic work. Breastfeeding did not influence parenting type. Children's attachments reflected their parents' arrangements. Alternating-shift fathers spent twice the time in solo childcare as equally sharing fathers spent. Resistance to nontraditional roles was common among alternating-shift couples. (Numerous stories of parental experiences highlight and illustrate the findings. Contains approximately 400 references.) (KB)

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